

TIBETAN WOMEN'S DAILY LIFE: FIRE, FUEL, WATER
COLLECTION, COOKING, AND CHILDCARE

Rdo rje don 'grub རོ་རྗེ་དོན་ལག་ལ། (Duoji eduanzhi 多杰端智,
Independent Scholar)

ABSTRACT

The daily lives of Lha mtsho skyid, Klu mo, and Tshe thar skyid, Tibetan women living in impoverished A bo rgyud (Awubuju) Tibetan Village, Gser gzhung (Jinyuan) Township, Dpal lung (Hualong) Hui Autonomous County, Mtsho shar (Haidong) City, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province in May 2011 are described. Aspects of fuel collection, family relationships, food preparation, child care, schooling, water collection, and day-to-day anxieties are described, illustrating the reality of their daily existence.

KEYWORDS

Amdo Tibetan women, Hualong Hui Autonomous County Tibetan women lives, fuel collection, Tibetan daily life, rural Qinghai

INTRODUCTION

I was in A bo rgyud Tibetan Village, Jinyuan Township, Hualong Hui Autonomous County,¹ Haidong City, Qinghai Province (see maps below) in May 2011, doing research on fuel use and collection by local Tibetan residents. This paper presents several narratives that detail the life of village women, illustrating the reality of their daily existence. The maps below illustrate this area:

Map of Qinghai Province.²Map of Haidong City, Qinghai Province.³

Jinyuan Township

¹ BA yan/PA yan, which is a town, are terms that are used for the county seat. These terms are also used interchangeably for the name of the county.

² An edited version of (Lincum 2013) at <http://bit.ly/2ol7n7f> (accessed 21 February 2018).

³ An edited version of <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haidong> (accessed 21 February 2018).

Pad ma¹ and I were in his truck on the road leading from Jinyuan² Township Town to Hualong Hui Autonomous County Town. Pad ma was busy hauling bricks between the County Town and a village near the town in his home township. A sharp cry from halfway up a mountain track surprised us. Pad ma stopped and shouted back. It was Lha mtsho skyid from a nearby village. She must have been in her seventies. As soon as she heard Pad ma shout and saw that he had stopped his truck, she galloped down the mountain like a teenager.

We waited in the truck. As she neared, I quickly got out to greet her and suggested that she sit in the passenger seat. I tossed her hand-made wooden basket into the back of the truck and jumped into the back seat.

As the truck began moving, she asked me where I was from and the purpose of my visit. She had likely detected something about my Tibetan dialect that told her I was an outsider. She had heard of my county, but had no idea where it was, as was the case with most other village women who have never been out of Hualong County or even their natal village. Pad ma answered her on my behalf.

Lha mtsho skyid was tall and thin with a deeply etched face. I wondered where she was going and where she had been so early in the morning with a wooden basket. I thought she must have children. I also thought, given her age, she should have been at home, like other old women with children and grandchildren, who spend much of their later years engaged in religious activities.

Through Pad ma and Lha mtsho skyid's conversation, I learned that she was collecting fuel on the mountains while looking for a ride so that she might transport a pile of dung that she has collected a few days earlier back to her home. She confided that she had snuck away from her home that morning. Her son-in-law and her oldest grandchild frequently urged her to stay at home. Tough and weathered,

¹ I have changed the names of people used in this paper.

² I use Tibetan and/or Chinese terms based on how they are used by local people. For example, "Hualong" is Chinese and "Ba yan" is Tibetan for the name of the county. However, A bo rgyud villagers use the Chinese term, so I have chosen to use "Hualong" in this paper.

she declared that she couldn't waste time doing nothing for the family.

I thought fuel collection was a huge amount of work for her, requiring a lot of time and energy. However, her strong steps and a determined posture suggested she was up to the task. I recalled the basket in the truck bed and imagined it filled with fuel on her bony back. I guessed her family was not well off, since she was still collecting fuel at such an advanced age. I admired her spirit, the sacrifices she was willing to make, and her concern for her family. I also thought her son-in-law should collect fuel. Like other women in A bo rgyud Village, she must have started collecting fuel at an early age and never stopped. She reminded me of one of my interviewees, Tshe thar skyid, who said, "The harsh and bleak experiences of fuel collection are carved in my heart and my worry about fuel is constant."

About twenty minutes later, she asked to get off. She said she would climb up the mountain for about thirty minutes to reach her dung pile. She offered us two bottles of a beverage she had bought. I was surprised and, of course, we didn't accept them, because we knew they must have been quite an expense if she had bought them. We politely declined. I wondered if they were gifts and doubted if she would drink them, but instead take them to her grandchildren. At the sight of a long mountain range, I wondered where among these mountains her dung pile was.

It was a humid day. The sun peeked out now and again, suggesting it might rain, but how much moisture would it provide to the bare mountains and the non-irrigated fields below the mountains? Recalling only one snowfall during my research site stay, I wondered, "Has the precipitation this relatively low land receives always been so limited?" The local environment was very important to villagers. It was their main source of life.

It was already mid-summer, but it was as if winter had just passed. All was bare. There was no sign of life re-emerging. On some mountains slopes, soil erosion was recklessly at work, ever expanding the area of destroyed land.

My contemplations after handing the old woman her wooden basket was interrupted when Pad ma told me that she had two sons and both were doing very well financially. I was surprised, but then realized why family members objected to her collecting fuel. I realized

that a life of hardship and fuel collection imperatives remained strongly fixed in her mind.

MORNING IN A BO RGYUD VILLAGE

I was awakened by Klu mo's footsteps. Like other women in the village, she was one of the first to break the silence of the village. Listening to her footsteps, I wondered what she was doing. I could hear her Tibetan robe gently fluttering as she walked. She eventually came to where I slept in a room that was about twice the size of the room she and her husband slept in. She walked across to her family's small shrine in the middle of a wooden wall. A copper goddess image was in the second of the three shelves in the cupboard. Pictures of *bla ma* kept it company. Listening to the clicking sound from the copper bowls that were offered on the table below the small shrine, I concluded she was emptying the water in the copper bowls and refilling them with clean water while murmuring scriptures I did not recognize. Once she finished her task, she quickly left the room. I turned off the electric heating pad underneath me, which had been on all night. I regretted not waking earlier and turning it off and thus reducing the family's electricity charge.

The door to Pad ma's room was ajar. Pad ma was sitting at the table on the *heeze*¹ when I entered to get hot water. Klu mo quickly reached for the blackened kettle next to a bread-baking pot, which also sat on the same metal stove. Wisps of smoke escaped from the stove, filling the room with a distinct odor. Klu mo's hands were smeared with wheat flour.

¹ The Chinese term for *heeze* is *kang*. Blo brtan rdo rje and Stuart (2008:26) write:

Heeze is a Tibetan word that lacks an accurate standard written form. Today, it is often written incorrectly in literary Tibetan as 'tsha thab' that translates to 'hot stove'. This is incorrect because the *heeze* is not a hot stove, rather, it is a hollow platform made of stones with a thin layer of dry, hard earth on top. Coals and smoldering straw and grain husks are placed inside to heat it. Felt is spread atop the *heeze*, which is where family members sleep and important guests sleep.

"You're up? Do you have a hangover?" she asked smiling, accentuating her protruding rosy cheeks. Her hand left a print on the tarnished kettle handle.

"I'm OK," I said and quickly stopped her pouring more hot water into the basin. I washed my face and hands outside in the courtyard.

"It snowed," I said cheerfully after I finished and returned to the small, low ceilinged room that I felt was perfectly designed for this high altitude area.

"Yes, it rained heavily and snowed afterwards," Klu mo remarked, gesturing, encouraging me to get up on the *heeze*. Pad ma had already finished breakfast and was savoring a cigarette on one side of the *heeze*, leaning against a wooden wall. A big picture of Lha sa adorned the wall. Underneath were pictures of the family taken at Sku 'bum.¹ Their children were living with their paternal grandfather who was retired now and living in the town where Sku 'bum was located. Klu mo told me that the children returned home once a year for the Tibetan New Year. She also said that she and Pad ma visited them after harvest, an annual ritual begun when their children started primary school. I noticed that their children's appearance contrasted with that of village children. The latter wore tattered clothes and had dark skin from exposure to the extreme weather. Klu mo was tense and had a very serious expression in the photo, which I attributed to her not often being photographed.

The *heeze* was still comfortably warm. Klu mo served me a cup of steaming milk tea after I settled on the *heeze*. Pad ma flicked his cigarette stub onto the brick-covered floor and announced the beginning of his day by picking up his cell phone and his leather shoulder bag.

Pad ma had sold his motorcycle to a villager. It was a good transaction, he said, but Klu mo disagreed, maintaining that Pad ma should have listened to her. Now he had to borrow motorcycles from relatives and other villagers, which he found embarrassing and

¹ Sku 'bum is a Dge lugs monastery located twenty-three kilometers northwest of Zi ling City. The monastery is dedicated to Rje tsong kha pa (1357-1419), the founder of the Dge lugs sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

difficult. He then had to drive the borrowed motorcycle to the Township Town, leave the motorcycle with a family, and then drive his truck to the county town.

His truck was parked outside his home this morning, ready to transport a pig to a Township Town buyer. This was a relief for Klu mo, because she would no longer have to care for the pig. I soon heard the pig's hysterical squeals. A middle-aged villager, who had come the day before to ask for a ride to the county town, was asked to help get the pig in the truck. He was better dressed than the day before. "Bad timing," I thought. He immediately went out to help after rolling up the sleeves of his suit. I wished I could help, but realized there were enough helpers. Pad ma soon announced he was ready to leave and before I could stand up, he was already out the door.

Klu mo busily added fuel to the stove and made bread. She went to an adjacent room and returned with a handful of plate-size dung patties, which she broke into pieces by banging them against the hearth. Pushing aside the pot a little, she dropped pieces inside and quickly put the pot back as sparks flashed. Oily smoke from the pot and dung smoke mingled, permeating the room. A window in front of me and the door were open to let the smoke in the room escape. I could feel chilly air. Regardless of the health impacts from the smoke, I wished the door and the window were closed. The *heeze* was warm, that was all. Burning dung put little warmth in the room. I drank my cup of hot milk tea, appreciating how it warmed me.

Noticing my half-empty cup, Klu mo came with the kettle. I held my cup with both hands to show respect.

"All right," I said once my cup was full and added, "Today I don't think you will be able to collect caterpillar fungus."

"Yeah," she replied.

"It snowed, so it'll be wet," I said.

"Yes," she said, putting the kettle next to the pot on the stove when the pot started humming. She checked the bread and stacked it on another two pieces of bread on a metal plate. Before she left to fetch a fifth piece of dough, she added some dung to the stove and poured some oil into a cooking pot.

Through the window, I saw her coming with a round piece of dough. She put the dough carefully in the smoky pot and went into the

adjacent room. I heard chopping. She came back periodically to check the bread and turn it over. After about fifteen minutes, she replaced the bread pot with a pot for cooking dishes. She tossed cubes of beef and strips of potatoes into hot oil. This cooking pot was soon replaced by a bigger water kettle. Klu mo went into the bigger room where I slept with a bowl, poured milk tea into the bowl, added a lump of fresh butter, and offered it to me. My nearly-finished cup of milk tea was removed. She next put out a bowl of the potato dish for both of us. We ate separately. I remained on the *heeze* while she sat in front of the traditional stove.

This was our breakfast, a generous breakfast in this village of forty-three households. Fresh milk tea with fresh butter, newly baked bread, and even better, a dish with meat. There were village families who had no dairy products, because they had sold their livestock. There were also families who rarely ate vegetable dishes. Vegetables that Han Chinese occasionally brought and sold in the village were old and expensive.

"You like potatoes," Klu mo remarked as I finished a bowl of food.

"Yes, it's one of my favorites," I replied.

"Good. Pad ma doesn't like potatoes. Whenever he sees potatoes, he says, 'What's special about potatoes?' When planting and harvesting potatoes, we argue. We fed most of last year's potatoes to our livestock, since he doesn't like them and I couldn't finish them alone." Then she got up and went to fetch the kettle of milk tea to refill my bowl and hers. I chuckled and remained silent, not knowing what to say.

We each had several bowls of milk tea and finished the dish. Our breakfast was filling. As Klu mo was cleaning the small square table where I ate, I said that I was going to make a phone call and went out. The signal inside the room was weak.

I stood in front of the newly constructed village shrine to make the phone call. Dozens of homes were on the mountain slope below where I stood. Columns of smoke clambered from each adobe chimney protruding from roofs. A veil of mist over the village was slowly lifting. The overcast sky began to give way to the late sun. It would be a sunny day. While I was phoning my family, the sight of a school-aged girl

caught my attention. I had met her a couple of days previous while at her family's shop, which was one of two shops in the village. They both sold pretty much the same thing - basic life necessities and batteries, candles for the frequent blackouts, beer, cigarettes, liquor, and so on. Both shops were in the families' homes. The girl had told me that she didn't want to attend school. I was surprised and decided to interview her family. Thinking I might have a chance to do this day, I went to get my notebook. A group of men nearby were enjoying cigarettes and staring at me, an outsider.

"Where are your parents?" I asked an older girl, standing near the school-aged girl by her courtyard gate. The sun was already out, casting rays over the quiet village, summoning villagers still inside their houses to come out and enjoy the sunshine.

"My parents are not at home," she replied and then whispered into her sister's ear. They were dressed in simple clothes and both wore scarves on their heads. Cheap whitening lotion was smeared unevenly on their faces.

"Where are they?" I inquired.

"Father is there," the older sister announced, pointing to the group of men.

"What about your mother?" I continued.

"No mother," she said.

I asked no follow-up questions, thinking her mother might be dead, but my curiosity remained. I also felt a surge of sympathy. "Please call your father," I said.

She then called to her father, who came over and invited me inside their home. I was ushered into a large, cold room. A metal stove on one side of the room was cold. Fire only flickered in a traditional adobe stove that accommodated two pots. This stove was attached to the *heezee* that heated the *heezee* and was used to cook. A wooden barrier separated the *heezee* and the stove.

In the middle of my interview, the two girls and the father's younger brother announced that they would go collect caterpillar fungus as the weather has turned sunny. The younger brother had married and moved into a nearby village but had come back to collect caterpillar fungus.

About half an hour later, without realizing the time, I asked

Bsod nams if he was going to collect caterpillar fungus. Shaking his head, he said it was too late. I was speechless with regret. While leaving, I apologized for keeping him.

As the sun rode high in a clear sky, I thought, "Villagers must be happy with this weather. They'll collect caterpillar fungus in the distant towering mountains." Although sales of caterpillar fungi were a major source of cash income, results from a half-day would likely be insignificant.

The village seemed empty and was utterly quiet, except for periodic high-pitched voices coming now and again from the village school.

TSHE THAR SKYID

Tshe thar skyid woke up as usual and, as she had done every day since her youthful marriage, she cautiously pulled on her ragged Tibetan robe in darkness. If any of her eight children woke up, it would disrupt her entire day's work.

She carefully pulled up the quilt so it was under her son's chin. All of her children were sleeping fast on the *heeze*. She was relieved. She fumbled her way to a wooden bucket in the corner of the room and put it on her back outside the house. She sighed. Nobody was to be seen in the village. A few scattered stars glimmered in the sky as a crisp breeze stroked the village.

She started walking towards the river that originated in the mountains behind the village and then flowed down through a valley a half hour walk away. She fetched water there every morning. The wooden bucket weighed as usual on her slightly hunched back. Walking the same path she had trod countless times before, she heard vague conversation in the direction of the river, which delighted her.

As she got close to the river, Tshe thar skyid saw several women fetching water. She greeted them, filled her own wooden bucket, and then helped other women secure their filled wooden buckets on their backs. A woman of Tshe thar skyid's age helped her put her own bucket on her back.

After reaching the top of the valley together, the women separated. Tshe thar skyid trudged home alone. No lights were visible in houses. Like every other woman in the village, Tshe thar skyid did this every morning, like her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother had done before her.

Walking back home with a heavy bucket of water was uncomfortable. A wind suddenly raged, sending dust everywhere. Tshe thar skyid stopped. Her back was curved like a bow. Every now and then she gently brushed her eyes with her thumb. Blinking frequently, she steadily continued. After about one hour, Tshe thar skyid was panting and sweating.

She relaxed once she was back in her home and saw that her children were still asleep. She squatted slowly and unloaded the bucket. Her first task of the day was now completed.

Tshe thar skyid pulled ashes out from the adobe stove, went to the stacked bushes near her family's gate, and brought two dried bundles back inside. Before squatting in front of the stove, she poured water into a pot to boil water for breakfast. Preparing a handful of dried twigs, she lit a match and held the twigs against it. The twigs quickly caught fire. Tshe thar skyid's face shone in the flame. The fire seemed stable so she carefully put the flaming bundle in the stove and added more fuel. Beads of sweat glinted on her forehead. She stayed in front of the stove, and fed the fire with handfuls of bushes now and then until the water in the pot started hissing and thick curls of steam rose. Tshe thar skyid then retrieved two thermoses from a shelf and filled them with boiling water.

Dawn still had not broken. Tshe thar skyid replaced the water pot with a baking pot and brought two more bundles of bushes and added it to the single bundle that remained.

The wind was still howling. Tshe thar skyid was glad the fire would heat the cooling *heezee*. The children were sound asleep. She added more bushes to the fire. After preparing a thin, flat pot-sized piece of dough, she came back to the pot and stoked the fire until the pot was hot. She laid the dough evenly in the pot and then left to prepare another piece of dough before adding more fuel. She came back regularly to check the bread, and also to ensure that the fire did not run out of fuel. At times, splinters pricked her hands when she

brought bushes and adjusted the brush in the stove. After about an hour, she had finished baking four pieces of bread, which would be enough for the day. Bread was indispensable to their daily meals.

The second important predawn task was done. It was now time to collect fuel. She put the plate of bread into a pot, and then picked up the sharpened sickle and a ball of rope she had prepared the night before. Smoke drifted up from flickering, smoldering charcoal.

Newly boiled hot water and fresh baked bread were prepared, but it was too early for her eight children. There was still time before daybreak. She left her home with the sickle and rope.

Seeing nobody, Tshe thar skyid went to the first of her fuel collection group member's door and gingerly rapped. A woman who was Tshe thar skyid's age soon appeared. A mother of four, she was still nursing her youngest child. Together they called several women and formed their usual group of five. After greeting each other, they talked nonstop as they walked, their laughter echoing in the wind in the rock-strewn valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains. After about half an hour, they reached one of their fuel destinations. They climbed a towering mountain that had been stripped of bushes at the foot from their frequent collection. It had much grass for their livestock, but few conifer trees, the result of villagers' logging for house construction and sales. They immediately began cutting bushes as though they were reaping crops, gripping sickles in their right hands and clutching as many bushes as they could with their left hands. They piled each bunch near their feet to form a bundle. Running against time, each woman tied up her own bundles, gathering the usual six bundles of bushes within an hour.

Then they relaxed and caught their breath. A bit later, they laid the ropes they had brought on the grass and piled their bundles on top. After tying the bundles, they gripped one end of the rope. Pulling the rough ropes and harvesting bushes made their hands sore. Their discolored palms were smudged with leaf fragments.

When they all had their bundles on their backs and clenched the ropes in front of their chests, Tshe thar skyid walked to the bush piles behind everyone's back and helped them stand. Finally, Tshe thar skyid was assisted by two women who already had bundles on their backs.

One step at a time, they descended the mountain. The intense exertion caused by cautiously staggering down the slope made them sweat and pant. Everyone was quiet until they crossed a river, when Tshe thar skyid suggested they rest. They settled their burdens on boulders that they then reclined against. Eyes on each other, there was only silence, other than the sound of a river flowing in the distance.

Wondering if her eight children were still in bed and realizing dawn would soon come, Tshe thar skyid suggested they continue. Gazing at the mountains, Tshe thar skyid wondered in which direction Lha sa was. It was where her husband was working. She wished he was with her and their children. He was one of the very few locals working outside the village. She was proud of this. She felt lucky to have such a husband, although she had to care for the family alone. Such thoughts frequently crossed her mind. Many times, she felt challenged as she examined every detail of her many difficulties.

After a few more stops they reached the village where the group split as each woman headed toward her own home.

A blanket of clouds wafted away at the arrival of dawn, revealing lofty mountains faraway in the east that glowed, promising a sunny day. Tshe thar skyid unloaded the fuel in the yard and entered the living room, where her children still slept. At the creak of the wooden door opening and the sound of Tshe thar skyid's footsteps, her oldest child turned and gazed at her mother. Beads of sweat glued strands of hair against her forehead. At night, Tshe thar skyid told her oldest son, who was eleven years old, to look after his siblings in the morning during her absence if any woke up. He had been very responsible, and Tshe thar skyid smiled at him gratefully. Thinking that her children might sleep a bit longer, she walked back to the bundles of bushes she had just collected.

Tshe thar skyid took her arms out of her robe's long sleeves and tied the sleeves behind her. She unknotted two bundles of bushes and divided them into six smaller bundles, the usual amount she carried to the township town to sell.

When she went back inside, she found that all her children were now awake. With her oldest child's help, she dressed the children and folded all the quilts except for one, which was for the nursing child during naps. As Tshe thar skyid placed a short-legged wooden table in

the middle of the *heezee* and was about to get a plate of bread, her youngest child cried. Tshe thar skyid hurriedly returned with the bread and served warm water that she had prepared and poured a bowl of tea for herself. The children sat around the table on the *heezee*. Tshe thar skyid sat with her baby cradled against her breast, nursing him. Somehow, she managed to have some bread and then entrusted all her children to an elderly neighbor. Tshe thar skyid gratefully thanked her neighbor and returned home.

Her children were playing nearby with other children. She gulped down a bowl of water, cleaned the table, and went to stack the remaining four big bundles of bushes on her family's fuel stack just outside the house. Her family's fuel stack was not the biggest in the village, but it was also not the smallest. Her stack was about three meters tall and nearly reached the top of her home's adobe surrounding wall. With the six small bundles of bushes on her back, she met four women from her fuel collection group.

Tshe thar skyid and her peers would walk eight kilometers on a dirt track to the township town. Looking into the distance, Tshe thar skyid wondered when she and her group would reach the town and hoped that they would each be able to sell the six bundles of bushes. Some days, she had to leave some fuel at shops and pay them to keep the bundles until she returned.

REFERENCE

- Rdo rje don 'grub. 2011. Fuel and Solar Cooker Impact in Ya na gdung Village, Gcan tsha County, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 10:153-175.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

dpal lung དཔ་ལུང་།

a bo rgyud ཨ་བོ་རྒྱུད།

a mdo ཨ་མདོ།

Awubuju ཨ་ུབ་ུའུ་ཁྱེ།

bA yan བ་ཡན།

Bayan ཡ་ཡན།

bla ma བླ་མ།

blo brtan rdo rje བློ་བརྟན་རྡོ་རྗེ།

bsod nams བསོད་ནམས།

dge lugs དགེ་ལུགས།

Duojiueduanzhi ཏཱ་ཏེ་ཏུ་འཛུགས།

gser gzhung གཤེར་གཙུང་།

Haidong མའི་དོང་།

Hualong རྩ་ལུང་།

Hui རྩེ་བུ།

Jinyuan རྩེ་ལུང་།

kang རྩེ་ལུང་།

klu mo ལུ་མོ།

lha mtsho skyid ལྷ་མཚོ་སྐྱིད།

lha sa ལྷ་ས།

mtsho shar མཚོ་ཤར།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།

pad ma པད་མ།

pA yan པ་ཡན།

rdo rje don grub རྡོ་རྗེ་དོན་རྒྱུབ།

rje tsong kha pa རྗེ་ཙོང་ཁ་པ།

sku 'bum སུ་འབུམ།

tshe thar skyid ཚེ་ཐར་སྐྱིད།

Xining སི་ཁྱེ་འགྲོ་ལྷོ།

zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།